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Have You Seen Jesus?

Luke 9:28-36

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Transfiguration

I remember the surprise I felt at a recent church talent show when a dignified, mostly reserved individual I know came onto this chancel dressed in drag. This individual interrupted four men who were singing a lovely Barbershop piece, and the experience was so delicious, so exquisite, that from that point on, I have never quite been able to see that person the way I saw him before.

In a more profound sense, this is the experience of the disciples at the transfiguration of Jesus. Peter, James and John see an entirely different side of their teacher. These three have traveled with Jesus, and walked with him across the country. Here they see Jesus in a new way.

Luke follows Mark in placing this story of the transfiguration *after* the section where Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ. What Peter reveals in his famous declaration came to him as a 'word of knowledge,' a deep knowing that came to him in the form of a specific spiritual gift, not something he worked out on his own.

Here, on the mountain top, Jesus is accompanied by two other great historical personages. Moses shows up, representing the Law, and Elijah shows up, representing the Prophets - the Law and the Prophets, a synonym for what we call the Old Testament. The three talk as equals. Then there is a great voice from on high, the same voice that was heard at Jesus' baptism, and this voice says, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Moses and Elijah disappear, and Jesus is left. As great as Moses and Elijah were, of neither one could God say, "This is my Son."

The Christian faith is about Jesus, about our courageous confession that in this Jew from Nazareth we have seen as much of God as we ever hope to see. God speaks to us in a number of ways: through nature, through the good works of other people, through the Bible, but God's singular self-communication is Jesus. We, therefore, are to listen to him. If we want to see God, we must look to and listen to Jesus. We are not free to make God into anything we please.

This is a real problem we are often unwilling to face. We live in a culture that makes of our God what it wants, and too often we stand by and disagree only in silence. We meet people who claim that God is some vague, ineffable, unknowable, indiscriminate experience that cannot be known. On a flight last October, a man told me that 'we all have our different concepts of God.'

It's one thing to admit that since we are finite creatures and God is God, we can never fully, completely know God. It's quite another thing to say that nothing can be known about God other than that which we personally believe about God. That's the modern 'know-nothingism' that infects many today.

Some weeks ago I heard a teenager say something like this: "To me, God is a force, like gravity. A force for good and love in the world." And that was just after he told me he was 'very religious.'

We do live in a free country, and so it has been ingrained in us that people may believe whatever they want. It has been ingrained in us that we must defend the right of someone to disagree with us, that this is a foundation of democracy. But we take it farther than we must. We begin to assume that every idea is of equal value and weight, and this kind of thinking obscures truth.

Christians are those who believe that one of the ways God has loved us is by revealing himself to us. Christianity is a revealed religion, something that has come to us from the outside. We celebrated this not too many weeks past when we gathered around the manger at Bethlehem. There we discovered that God has a face, a name, a family. Our God is not some force or some principle - our God has a name, and that name is Jesus.

The average American home has the television turned on for more than seven hours per day. Each individual watches approximately 4 ″ hours of television each day. When a 12th grader graduates from high school, they have spent more hours watching television than they have spent in school and will have viewed approximately 500,000 commercials. Do we allow ourselves to look for God in our lives when so much of our time is filled with so many diversions?

Folks, we have lost our ability to interpret events from a theological perspective. When the Titanic went down in 1912, the general population immediately placed that event in the scriptural context of 'Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.' When the space shuttle *Challenger* blew up in 1986, a television anchor groped for words and finally asked, 'Does this mean that the Russians are ahead now?'

The Gospel is not some primitive means of finding meaning in life or attempting to talk about the world in a mythic or 'spiritual' way. The Gospel is witness, testimony to something that has happened to us and to the world - testimony that something is afoot called the outbreak of the kingdom of God. The life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus has altered the total human situation. The coming of the kingdom of God to earth is a very real threat to the sovereignty of every other kingdom. And the Gospel is prone to conflict with every culture in which it makes its way, including the one in which it was originally embodied.

There have always been attempts *to ignore* Christianity by pointing to the excesses of the people who call themselves Christian. The Crusades come to mind, or the Spanish Inquisition, or the Salem witch trials, or the silence of many Christians in Germany in the late 1930's and early 1940's. Everyone can come up with an example of some overzealous believer.

And there have always been attempts *to pacify* Christianity, though these are more difficult to spot. Recent theology written in North America hopes to find a neutral, all-embracing higher ground where we can stand about the conflict inherent in the worship of different deities. Usually the common ground is only some other ersatz deity like 'pluralism' or 'inclusiveness,' and

the supposed common ground invariably fails to do justice to the true differences among the religions it claims to be adjudicating. I suspect that the search for some neutral, non-conflicted way of talking about different religions is due to the lingering sense among many theologians that they have a responsibility to keep American culture working smoothly, that religious conflict is judged to be particularly nefarious, so let's make everything one big soup.

For example, Harvard's Diana Eck complains that the God of Israel and the church is far too 'exclusive' to be helpful in handling contemporary religious differences, which she considers to be at the heart of most contemporary political conflict. So Professor Eck begins by worshipping tolerance, or pluralism, or some other limp secular virtue as a way to deal with a violent world, and then attempts to salvage those aspects from the Jewish and Christian Scriptures that conform to her predetermination of what the world needs before it knows God. She does the same thing with Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism, jettisoning any historical, particular character of a faith in the interest of an allegedly more all-embracing faith. For example, why must the God of Israel be so exclusive? Why get worked up over a bit of idolatry among friends? What's the harm of a little idolatry and paganism on the side, as long as it makes us feel better and if it helps to unite a diverse culture?

A hundred years ago, Soren Kierkegaard called the Gospel a 'scandal of particularity.' Our God has a face, a name, a definite form. The God who comes to us in Jesus is a person who tends to take things, including us, personally. Yahweh is a jealous God. As a matter of fact, I would say, though it may be jolting to some, that there is no such thing as 'grace,' but only a gracious God who has a face, a name, and a family. So many people speak of God and what he gives, and not speak to him - you can't depersonalize Christianity. The word 'Christian' isn't an adjective used to describe behavior, but a noun, used to describe a relationship.

The Transfiguration is another biblical account of how salvation really does come through the Jews. The way God has deemed to save the world from itself is through Israel and the church. Any attempt to sidestep this particularity of election - for example, to make the modern case for universal salvation -- is to be rejected as an arrogant effort to evade the scandal that God comes to us in, of all places, Nazareth in, of all forms, a Jew, to gather up into the divine promise, of all people, us Gentiles.

The disciples with Jesus on that mountain that day fell asleep. When they awoke, it was only to see the glory of Jesus and his companions. They missed the conversation, the part about Jesus 'departure.' Since Jesus had already made known to them the *fact* of his impending sufferings, what they seem to have missed was how these sufferings fit into the divine plan. They scurried to make amends by seeking to construct a permanent dwelling place so everyone could just wallow forever in the glory being manifested up there at the top. But that was never the plan. Suffering is part of being a follower of Jesus, and nobody gets to leave early. Declaring who we are is another part, and that's why we are Christians and not Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses, and that's why it *does* make a difference to tell our culture that the Gospel will not be tamed, and we will not lessen the peculiarities of our historically embedded faith.

This is what the Transfiguration is all about, on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, the Sunday before the season of Lent. We read Luke 9 to remind each other that we are to listen *to him*. If we want to see God, then we must look to and listen *to him*. We are not free to make God over into anything we please. God is not some amorphous blob that we can shape at will. God has a definite shape and disposition, says certain things, and not others. The teenager who thinks of God as a force may be religious, but he is not a Christian.

And, of course, this is why we gather here at church on a regular basis. We obey the voice on the mountain by listening to Jesus. We attempt, just for an hour, to shut out the cacophony of other voices, and we try to listen just to him. We recognize that the transfiguration came after Jesus stopped, and prayed, and we try, this morning, not to fall asleep. Excluding all of our false gods, we try to honor him by letting him be Lord of our lives. When we get it right, when we put aside our many false gods, our confusion is healed, and we receive reassurance of his lordship. The others disappear and Jesus stands along among us. Son of God, the chosen, our hope in life, in death, and in life beyond death.

We have seen Jesus. Have you?

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